

Dear Committee Members:

I have been a DCF foster parent for nearly ten years. Over this time I have had nearly 30 children placed in my home for foster care, provided respite and in-hospital support for at least that many more, adopted both a baby and a teenager out of the system, and I am pre-adoptive for a third child right now. It is with this experience that I support the creation of an Office of Child Advocate. I have so many stories I could share. There has been so much joy, love, success--the reunifications with families of origin, or adoptions to safe relatives--but mostly, my stories are filled with loss and pain inflicted by this broken, mess of a system. This very system that is both supported and condemned by the decisions and priorities of the very people reading this letter. I'm not even sure that my stories would be helpful. If I told you about some of 'my' kids, what would you do with that information? If I told you that I cared for a 7 year old for whom I was foster home number 12, or that I cared for a newborn whose body was so broken it was held together with the straps of a medical harness but he was still returned to his parents, or the teen who died by suicide after a lifetime of system failure; if I told you these stories, what could you possibly do with that information? You're unable to find out who they are (or were), what they went through, where they were failed, or why, or by whom--you can't even verify that what I say is true. We already know what supports safety and resilience in children. We know what benefits children and families. And we know that thriving children and families benefit us all. This research is being done and the data is available. Why aren't we listening? Why aren't we acting? If we could shift our community and cultural priorities, and with thoughtful legislation, the children of Vermont could actually thrive. I could close my foster license! I have comforted the newborns with neonatal abstinence syndrome, other little bodies with broken bones that have been crushed and twisted and shaken, elementary school bodies that have been raped and beaten. Children that have never experienced a single healthy relationship. I have held these children. They exist. They are right here in Vermont. We are failing to meet their most basic needs. The Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate can hold DCF accountable, although, perhaps if we were to provision DCF properly enough to do their work well in the first place, we could spend less time having to hold them accountable. I think about the data this office could produce and the independent voice that could share these incredible stories with both anonymity and a very real connection to the fact that these experiences are happening right here, all around us. The Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate could determine where we go wrong and how to make sure that the very people who are trying to help aren't adding more trauma. They could point us in the direction of prevention, resilience, and healing. Please support the Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate.

Thank you,

Anne Ward
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